Report to

The Honourable Sandra Pupatello, Minister of Community & Social Services

Review of

Employment Assistance Programs in Ontario Works & Ontario Disability Support Program

By Deb Matthews, M.P.P.
Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister

December 2004

Table of Contents

105-01648/

Contents	Page
Introduction	3
Where I Went and Who I Heard From	7
What I Heard	8
Issues Raised and Recommended Action	
• Understand and respond to the diversity of the caseload	9
• Eliminate barriers and disincentives to employment	12
• Provide the range of tools that people need to get to work	19
• Simplify program rules and streamline administration	25
• Eliminate punitive rules that act as disincentives to economic independence	27
• Change internal and external attitudes about social assistance recipients	29
• Improve relationships with employers, partners, other ministries, and other levels of government	31
• Evaluate programs and policies	34
Conclusion	35
Appendix A: List of Contributors & Written Reports	36
Appendix B: Social Assistance Policy Reports	41
Appendix C: Terms of Reference & Consultation Plan	46
Appendix D: Discussion Questions	48

Introduction

This report is the result of a series of discussions across Ontario with hundreds of people who have an interest in social assistance. It attempts to consolidate the multitude of suggestions into one document and offers recommendations that, if implemented, will deliver better results for the money we spend and provide people with the supports they need to move toward economic independence.

The review was an opportunity to ask people on the front-lines how they would improve the system, and to listen to their answers. It was designed to take stock of the current system of employment assistance within Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), to learn about what is and is not working, and to better understand the challenges faced by clients and those who work within the system. It provided opportunities to learn about ideas and programs that are working effectively in some of our communities.

Discussions occurred within the context of a new Liberal government at Queen's Park – one that is committed to improving Ontario's approach to social assistance. During the election campaign we said that, "the current welfare scheme provides little opportunity for people to get the skills they need to find meaningful, long-term work." Our goal was to "help welfare recipients with skills training, child care and affordable housing to create opportunities to get off welfare permanently."[1]

Reforms to social assistance programs must be delivered in the context of the current fiscal responsibilites facing the provincial government. Taxpayers must be confident that this government is spending money in ways that achieve the best possible result for each dollar spent. Accordingly, our primary goal must be to provide clients with access to opportunities that enhance their ability to find meaningful, long-term employment and to give them the supports they need to become taxpayers.

At a time when some employers are raising concerns that a shortage of skilled trades restricts their ability to produce, we must capitalize on all available human resources in Ontario. That most certainly includes people who are currently on social assistance and who, with the appropriate tools and supports, could help fill that shortage.

It is important to recognize the magnitude of the social assistance programs and the opportunity we have to focus resources where they are most needed. In 2003/04, social assistance cost the taxpayers of Ontario $4.6 billion and represented approximately 7% of the provincial government's budget. Almost 700,000 people in the province, including almost 200,000 children, rely on social assistance to meet their most basic needs.

The limitations of this report must also be recognized. The report offers recommendations for change; however, it does not examine every policy alternative, nor does it estimate the costs associated with the recommendations. This report is only a first step. It is not a comprehensive document – it reports only what I heard most often. I hope it will serve as a focus for further discussion and be a useful tool that helps guide improvements to the current system.

Any review of social assistance programs delivered by the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) cannot be conducted in isolation from programs in other ministries. There are critical links between various provincial programs as well as programs managed by other levels of government. The need for social assistance is often a result of failures in other sectors of government and society, and conversely, the failure to address the needs of social assistance recipients has a direct impact on the demand for other government services. Thus, for example, while the lack of affordable housing, insufficient mental health services, inadequate access to child care and high drop-out rates may contribute to peoples need to access the system, inadequate social supports may result in increased demand on the healthcare system, the police and justice system, and Children's Aid Societies.[2]

Thus, it is clear that reforms to social assistance programs are only part of the solution to improving the lives of vulnerable people. The government must be more aggressive in addressing the systemic issues that exacerbate the need for social assistance. OW must aim to be a temporary solution of last resort for people who need financial support and access to training

[1] *"Achieving our Potential: The Ontario Liberal Plan for Economic Growth", January 2003, p.15.*
[2] *A useful study that examines this relationship is "Protecting Children is Everybody's Business," United Way of London and Middlesex, October 2003.*

opportunities for employment that might not otherwise be available. A successful employment assistance program will focus limited resources on breaking the cycle of poverty, allow families to live in dignity while transitioning through difficult circumstances, and move people back into the work force.

We must communicate more effectively within our own ministry, and break down silos between ministries and levels of government with a view to improving the lives of social assistance recipients. Employers and community groups want to be included and have much to offer; it is our responsibility to invite partners outside government to become part of the solution.

After travelling throughout Ontario, and speaking to a wide range of people with diverse interests, I am confident that the Liberal government can meet its responsibilities, deliver on its campaign promises and spend money more wisely by:

- Moving from the current punitive approach, to establishing a supportive, client-centered approach to social assistance that addresses the real issues standing in the way of clients securing employment.
- Moving from a system so mired in a labyrinth of rules around financial eligibility, to a system where the rules are simple, clear, well-communicated and focused on helping people improve their circumstances and opportunities for success.
- Moving from programs based on ideology and political considerations, to programs and support based on real client needs, backed by empirical program and policy evaluation.
- Moving from a system that rewards municipalities for meeting activity quotas, to a system that rewards the achievement of lasting results.

From a more philosophical perspective, it is helpful to think that every law or government program enables or encourages, or conversely, prohibits or discourages some behaviour or activity. The philosophy underpinning the current system is that people will abuse social assistance if given the opportunity. As a result, the system relies far too much on sanctions and prohibitions as its guiding principles and, in many ways, actually inhibits people from moving toward social economic independence.

An alternative philosophy should be based on the assumption that people will choose to better their lives and those of their children if given the appropriate opportunities. A Liberal social assistance program should promote opportunity, encourage success and seek to address the particular needs and challenges that each individual faces. It should maintain adequate safeguards, and recognize that individuals have a personal responsibility to improve their future. The following report describes some ways in which that can be done.

Moving toward reform of the social assistance system

Under a new, improved social assistance system Ontario Works would be a program focused on "getting people ready for the next job". It would be limited to and designed for people who are either currently or potentially employable in a full-time job. It would provide financial support for people who, for a wide range of reasons, are not currently working and have no other means of support. It would also offer a range of employment supports and training opportunities that would assist people in their transition from social assistance to sustained, meaningful employment. It would incorporate the importance of personal responsibility for moving forward.

Reforms to the existing system would be made with the acknowledgement that:

- The caseload is enormously diverse – there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to helping people move from social assistance to sustained employment.
- People want to work and be economically independent.
- A skilled workforce is essential to the future economy of the province. We cannot afford to fail to maximize the potential of our labour force.
- People applying for OW are at a low point in their lives, and may well need supports beyond

financial and employment needs before they can transition to sustainable employment.

- Sustained employment is a process, not an event. To move forward along that continuum of employability, and the challenge for someone on social assistance is to move forward on that continuum. Some people arrive a considerable distance away from being ready to work, while others arrive ready to work and simply need the right opportunity or the right supports. Many people, especially those who have been out of the paid labour force for some time, need post-employment supports to help them keep their jobs and possibly move into better-paying positions. Job retention would be given as much attention as getting a job.
- The labour market has a tremendous influence on an individual's ability to secure employment. That is, there is a broader context in which social assistance operates; that context varies from place to place and over time, and must be considered when developing program goals.
- People on social assistance have much to contribute to the community beyond employment, and providing opportunities to contribute and be part of a community is also part of our responsibility.
- Research and evaluation need to be integral components of new and existing programs. MCSS would foster linkages with universities and other research organizations with a view toward continuous assessment and improvement of programs based on evaluation results.

Specifically, an improved Ontario Works program would:

- Have rules that are clear, simple and well-communicated, and based on the goals and values of the program.
- Allow participants to supplement their income through incentives offered for participation in programs that improve employability as well as employment income.
- Include an initial assessment of employability, followed by the tailoring of individualized programs that would recognize the strengths of the individuals as well as their barriers to employment. While some people on the caseload are ready to work, others need to build specific assets; for example, Canadian experience, freedom from addictions, stable housing or a strong reference letter.
- Include training and placements geared toward improving employability, and the acquisition of other skills less directly related to employment, such as budgeting, life skills, and parenting.
- Position OW offices as places to access the required supports.
- Foster strengthened links with employers to optimize the value of training and placements.
- Adequately prepare people for existing jobs and support them for a period of time after employment.
- Recognize that Ontario Works is a program designed for people who are, or could be, employable and economically independent. People who are eligible for ODSP would be given the assistance they need to move to ODSP, and those with multiple barriers to full-time employment but not eligible for ODSP would be identified and given supports appropriate for long-term dependence. A concerted effort would be made to identify people who qualify for ODSP, and assist them in their application. As a result, employment support initiatives through OW would be focused on those who would most benefit from them, while people who are unlikely to be economically independent would find income security through ODSP or other supports.

There is an enormous willingness from everyone I spoke with to tackle the problems within the current social assistance framework, along with an absolute certainty that we must improve the well being of individuals requiring assistance. I hope this review will offer some insights into that challenge.

Finally, this report would not be complete without gratefully acknowledging the extraordinary contributions made by Karen Glass, Richard Fortin, Chris Shantz, Miranda Morgan and Andrea Dean. Karen and Richard accompanied me throughout this journey. This work has truly been a collaborative effort, and would not have been possible without their enthusiasm and their dedication.

Where I Went and Who I Heard From

During the review, I attended over 60 meetings in 17 Ontario communities:

- Ancaster
- Etobicoke
- Hamilton
- Kingston
- Kitchener
- London
- Muskoka
- Napanee
- North Bay
- Northumberland
- Ottawa
- Peel
- Picton
- Scarborough
- St. Catharines
- Sudbury
- Toronto

I heard directly from:

- over 70 community-based organizations
- more than 200 Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) workers and related municipal staff
- over 100 people receiving social assistance
- approximately 20 employers
- constituents at 14 MPP-initiated meetings
- members of the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW)
- members of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)

I also received written submissions from a wide range of groups and individuals.

What I Heard

The opportunity to discuss the current system for social assistance was extremely well received among all groups throughout the province. People were open, enthusiastic, supportive and very happy to be asked what they think after many years of being ignored. People accepted the discussions as genuine; there appeared to be no cynicism about the process. The Terms of Reference and Discussion Questions for the review were posted on the MCSS web site, and written submissions were welcomed so that interested parties had the opportunity to participate.

While expectations with regard to social assistance reforms are high, most people understand and are prepared to work within the current fiscal limitations faced by the government. Many of the suggestions put forward during the review are low cost or no cost, and many will result in cost savings, especially with respect to administrative activities. Other suggestions require short-term investments for longer-term savings. Still others require more focused research and further discussion before a decision can be made regarding possible reform.

Several major themes emerged throughout the discussions. Remarkably, while local labour market contexts varied across the province, the same themes were heard consistently in all places and from all groups. Indeed, one of the key findings of this review is the virtually unanimous consensus among diverse groups about reforms required to improve the current system.

Stakeholders were, by far, more interested in discussing issues related to Ontario Works than the Ontario Disability Support Program. Although it addresses social assistance in general, this report reflects that focus.

This report is a summary of what I heard from various stakeholder groups across the province, what I learned about the current system, and recommendations regarding opportunities for meaningful reform.

Issues Raised and Recommended Action

1. Understand and respond to the diversity of the caseload

I was enormously impacted by the diversity of people receiving social assistance and also by the lack of readily available data on the make-up of our caseload to guide programming. In addition, I came to understand that many barriers to employment have nothing to do with skills training, and much to do with a multitude of other issues that require resolution before a client can even begin to think about getting a job.

We need to better understand and respond to the diversity of the social assistance caseload. We need to know who is receiving social assistance, why they need it, what barriers to employment they face, and what supports they need to transition to social and economic independence. Only then will we be able to provide effective, individualized programs for the wide range of people on the caseload, and only then will we be able to set measurable outcome goals against which we can assess the success of targeted programs.

Stakeholder Feedback:

Develop specific strategies for target groups

The current "cookie-cutter/assembly line" approach to social assistance is inappropriate given the diversity of the caseload. Stakeholders suggested a need to develop special strategies and targets for specific groups of people, including, but not limited to:

Women and families fleeing domestic abuse

- We need to recognize this group's unique legal, safety and psychological needs.[1]
- Program guidelines include the proviso to not pursue child support if violence is a possible consequence; however, staff need better training to administer program in light of proviso.[2]

Sole support parents of school-aged children[3]

- Recognize that they are highly motivated to gain social and financial independence and make a better life for their children.
- Supports must recognize the full range of parents' responsibilities to their children.

Young parents

- A focus on completion of basic education, preparation for the job market and the enhancement of parenting skills is required.
- LEAP (Learning, Earning and Parenting) got rave reviews and it was described as "a phenomenal program." It currently is mandatory for 16 and 17 year olds and can be accessed up to age 21; some suggest that it be made mandatory for parents beyond age 17.

Teenage children (15-17) of OW recipients and young adults (18-20) on social assistance

- These groups were identified as being at high risk of becoming long-term recipients.
- Early and intensive intervention aimed at establishing them in good jobs with long-term prospects is required.

[1] There has been some excellent research conducted on how Ontario Works fails to address these needs, including Janet Mosher's "Walking on Eggshells: Abused Women's Experiences of Ontario's Welfare System;" Colleen Purdon's "Woman Abuse and Ontario Works in a Rural Community: Rural Women Speak about their Experiences with Ontario Works;" and MPP Laurel Broten's recommendations. I urge that careful consideration be given to these reports and other research as we develop a targeted strategy for this specific group.

[2] Program guidelines already include this proviso. Staff training supports for victims of domestic violence is a priority.

[3] One example of an empirically based program that should be carefully evaluated is Families First, based on Gina Browne's book, "When the Bough Breaks." Peel Region is currently engaged in a pilot project that is showing very promising results.

Newcomers to Canada

- Newcomers face unique barriers to employment, including language and cultural issues.
- Foreign training, accreditation and experience are often not recognized in Canada.
- Psychological supports may be required for those who have experienced trauma.
- Fear of government officials based on past experiences needs to be understood.
- The federal government settlement support period is inadequate.

Homeless people

- A diverse range of needs characterizes this group, including lack of affordable housing, addictions and mental health issues.
- Their unique set of barriers to gaining and maintaining employment need to be addressed.

Previously incarcerated people

- The "gap on the resume" presents unique challenges.
- The process of obtaining a pardon is lengthy and impacts their ability to obtain employment.

People with addictions

- Current MCSS pilot programs are highly regarded and should be expanded.

People with multiple barriers to employment

- Taken individually, none of the barriers alone qualifies this group for ODSP, but taken together, multiple barriers make it very difficult for them to obtain and maintain full-time, sustained employment.
- The nature of their need for social assistance is not temporary.
- Although there is no data to support it, those responsible for service delivery estimate that this group represents 10 - 20% of the OW caseload.
- The magnitude is such that fully 42% of the current ODSP caseload is composed of people who were grandfathered in under the "Permanently Unemployable" (PUE) category when the changes to the system were made in 1998. People who would have qualified as PUE prior to 1998 no longer qualify for assistance through ODSP, and thus remain on the OW caseload.
- There is an expectation that this group will continue to grow as people with multiple barriers come in to, but rarely transition out of, OW.
- There are two causes of the problem: first, there is no appropriate categorization for "very hard-to-employ" clients – their inability to work is not temporary, yet they do not qualify for ODSP; secondly, the ODSP application process is so cumbersome that some people who do qualify never access the program.[1]
- A significant number of OW clients should, in fact, be ODSP clients and indeed would have been prior to 1998. I argue that these people, while they have much to contribute to society in general, are highly unlikely to ever maintain permanent, full-time employment due to multiple barriers. However, MCSS spends considerable amounts of money "training" these people, diverting resources from those who would really benefit from enhanced employment supports. We need to provide increased financial support, social supports and opportunities for clients to contribute in ways other than through the competitive employment market.

[1]Concerns were repeatedly expressed that the application process for ODSP is extremely cumbersome for people with intellectual or mental disabilities. It prevents eligible people from applying, they stay on OW when they belong on ODSP. I heard many concerns that lack of access to a family doctor limits a client's ability to apply for ODSP. Walk-in clinics will not participate in the application process.

Recommendations:

Analyze and utilize existing caseload data more effectively; collect and analyze additional relevant information	• Better information is required on factors related to barriers and opportunities to facilitate targeted programming. • Data should be collected at individual, not aggregate levels to allow for in-depth analysis. • Offer programs that respond to barriers and opportunity.
Develop employment strategies for target groups	• Implement pilot projects with measurable outcomes in conjunction with community partners to test the effectiveness of targeted strategies. • Expand successful programs.
Recognize that for those with multiple barriers to employment, social assistance is not temporary.	• Provide additional supports to those for whom multiple barriers to employment result in long-term dependence on social assistance.*
Streamline the ODSP application process	• Assign advocates to help collect documentation and support client applications. Reform the appeals process; currently a very high percentage of applications for ODSP are denied, appealed, and subsequently approved.†

This indicates there are serious problems within the approval process. It also means that many people who are disabled live on OW supports for years, and have to go through the stress and expense of an appeal.

2. Eliminate barriers and disincentives to employment

A number of disincentives to work have been built into the system, creating a situation in which it sometimes is more beneficial – at least in the short-term – for someone to stay on social assistance than it is to work. This section discusses those disincentives, as well as other barriers that prevent people from working, even if there are jobs available and they have the skills necessary to obtain employment.

In order to identify and eliminate barriers to employment, it is important that we understand the context in which people on social assistance live, and see the issues from their point of view. Their lives are filled with such uncertainty that the certainty of a monthly social assistance cheque and the associated benefits has enormous value and there is a real reluctance to risk jeopardizing that certainty. Even if there is a chance that life will be better if a client gets and keeps a job, there is the offsetting chance that their life and the lives of their children will be worse if things do not work out.

Across Ontario, the same issues were consistently identified as barriers and disincentives to employment. There is a broad consensus on what stands in the way of clients obtaining employment, other than job availability and lack of appropriate skills. By removing these disincentives and lowering the barriers to work, a substantial proportion of the caseload would be able to enter into the labour force with less risk. Our challenge is to minimize the risk associated with work, at least for a period of transition into the labour market.

Stakeholder Feedback:

a) Loss of drug and dental benefits

Drug benefits provide a very important source of security for social assistance recipients and their children. While some clients are very reluctant to give up their drug card in case they ever need it, others already have prohibitively high drug costs, so losing the benefits would wipe out any gains made by working.[1] Still others with mental health issues and those who require expensive drug therapies are often employable provided they take their medications; however, without sufficient medication these individuals are unable to maintain sustained employment. Suggestions on how to address the issues varied, but all stakeholders agreed they warrant serious attention.

> *"All you need is one asthmatic child" to make giving up the drug card a risk not worth taking.* (Caseworker)

> *"It's a vicious cycle. When they are on ODSP, they get their drugs covered, they take their medication, get stabilized and can work. But when they get a job, they lose their drug card, stop taking their medications, and become unemployable. Wouldn't we be better off just to give them their drug card and let them keep it?"*
> (Community Mental Health worker)

[1] *I was told that only 40% of people with spinal cord injuries have paid employment, even though many more are able and want to work. The reason so few work according to one participant is that, "They are afraid of losing their drug card. They would be lost without it." (London medical expert)*

Recommendations:

Consider various options to remove loss of the drug card as a disincentive to employment	**Some possible options are:** • Extend benefits for a period of time until recipients qualify for employer benefits; if no employer benefits, extend social assistance benefits for a transition period. • Provide bridge financing to the Trillium Drug Plan. With Trillium people have to pay for drugs at the time of purchase and seek reimbursement later – people who rely on social assistance do not have the money to do that.* • Make drug benefits available to all low-income people. • Provide permanent drug cards for people with disabilities; the cards would stay with them regardless of their income or until their income reaches a certain level.
Educate people about the rules concerning drug card eligibility	• There is tremendous misinformation about the loss of drug and dental benefits. • Many clients incorrectly believe they will lose the card and benefits if they earn any income whatsoever.

b) Earnings exemptions

Earnings exemptions refer to the way in which earned income affects the amount of the social assistance cheque, and is also referred to as the STEP program. This topic was always one of the first identified as a disincentive to employment at roundtable discussions. The current policies are complicated, punitive and counter-productive. They take a long time to explain and are very difficult to understand, negating any value they have as incentives to work. Confusion about the rules and the administration of earnings exemptions creates fear for clients of inadvertently breaking the rules and losing their benefits. Rather than working to wean people off social assistance, the current system acts to keep people under-employed.

There are four major issues regarding earnings exemptions that were consistently raised. Firstly, every dollar earned is deducted from the social assistance cheque for the first three months on assistance. Consequently, the incentive for a social assistance recipient to earn money during that period is removed and their ties to the paid labour force are severed. In a system where labour force attachment is a primary goal, this policy is counterproductive.

Secondly, after the initial three-month period recipients may earn a certain amount of money (called the basic exemption), depending on their family size, without triggering a deduction from their social assistance cheque. This exemption was increased to allow people to earn money to make up for the rate cuts in 1995. Once earnings exceed that level, 75% of earnings is deducted for the first year of employment, 85% in the second year and 100% in the third and following years. There was very strong support for the idea that the share of earnings deducted should not be increased over time. Again, labour force attachment should be encouraged regardless of the length of time an individual is on social assistance.

*Middlesex County recently began providing a service whereby they make financial arrangements with the pharmacist so a client who qualifies for Trillium benefits does not have to pay for their drugs directly.

Thirdly, keeping only 25% of earnings in the first year is not a strong enough incentive to work, especially when costs of employment, and increased child care and rental costs (if living in a geared-to-income unit, are considered).[1]

Finally, there currently is no way for a statement showing the deductions and the calculation of the amount of the cheque to be generated by Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT). This leads to confusion and mistrust.

A different, but related issue is the 6-week delay between the time earnings are reported and the time funds are deducted from social assistance payments, creating large fluctuations in monthly income.[2] The delay is confusing, makes it difficult for people to budget, creates hardship, and thus acts as another disincentive to work.

It is important to develop earnings exemptions rules that encourage people to work as much as they are able. When clients supplement their income through earnings, it not only increases their income, but it fosters labour market attachment, is better for the economy, and reduces the costs of social assistance programs.

"When I took a part-time job my rent and child care costs went up, so it ended up costing me more to work than to stay home." (OW recipient)

"I work eight hours at minimum wage to earn $10. It just isn't worth it. It's too hard on my kids." (OW recipient)

"We are trying to encourage labour force attachment. Why would we be giving people an incentive to lose their job and end their attachment in order to be eligible for assistance?" (OW worker)

[1] For example, under the current system, a sole-support parent of a 12-year-old child would keep about $250 of $1000 earned over the flat exemption of $275. After factoring in expenses related to work such as clothing, transportation, and other expenses, as well as an increase in her rent-geared-to-income apartment and child care costs, she may well be financially worse off working those extra one hundred hours (assuming a $10/hour job). After 12 months, that amount would be reduced to $150, a further disincentive. After 24 months, that parent could earn $1000, but would have absolutely no financial benefit to show for it, and once work-related expenses were considered, she could be substantially worse off.

[2] For example, an individual who secures seasonal employment during Christmas will receive a social assistance cheque in December for the regular amount, in addition to their earnings. The cheque received in January will also be for the regular amount, but the December earnings will be deducted from February's cheque, leaving a very small amount to live on during that month (given that the seasonal work has ended). The client is, in fact, better off for having worked, but there is an added risk given the volatility of the cash flow and the fear of being cut off social assistance for having earned too much. When life is unstable, stability is worth a lot.

Recommendations:

Change earnings exemption policies to encourage labour force participation	• Eliminate increased "claw back" after 12 and 24 months. **Further options to be considered are:** • Eliminate the 3-month qualifying period for earnings exemptions. • Implement a straight 50% exemption, so that for every dollar earned, the benefit is reduced by 50 cents.[12] • Implement a combination of an earnings exemption and, beyond that, a straight 50/50 split. • Explore moving to a wage supplement approach that would top up earnings rather than deduct earnings from a benefit. Depending on how it is structured, such an approach could help some people transition away from social assistance. • Calculate earnings exemptions based on the net (as opposed to gross) benefit to the participant.
Develop a plan to prevent great fluctuations in monthly income for seasonal workers	• Consider an annual earnings exemption before "claw back" (e.g. Canada Pension Plan allows $3500 per year) to allow for seasonal work. - Alternatively, calculate exemptions quarterly to reduce the great fluctuations.
Enhance client statements to show the calculation of social assistance payments	• Currently there is no way to obtain a printed reconciliation from SDMT showing how employment earnings deductions are calculated.

c) The quit-fire rule

According to the "quit-fire" rule, a client who quits or is fired from their job is ineligible for benefits for a three-month period. If it happens a second time, the ineligibility period is extended to six months. As a result, clients are reluctant to take a job in case it does not work out. They would rather stay within a system they know than risk losing everything if they lose their job.

Concerns were expressed that some employers abuse the rule to take advantage of the vulnerability of their employees. I also heard that it's difficult for caseworkers to determine whether or not they should apply the rule.

"I feel like I have to be an employment standards expert." (Caseworker)

[12] This approach has the advantage of being extremely easy to explain and understand. I am told that about half of the states in the United States have moved to this approach.

Recommendations:

Eliminate the quit-fire rule	• Replace with post-employment supports that will help people retain their job.

d) Inadequate access to transportation

If people cannot get to their jobs, they cannot work. The issue of transportation is a problem for social assistance recipients both in areas without or underserved by public transit, and also in larger cities where long commutes are often required. Many new jobs are located on the outskirts of cities where there is no public transit. In rural areas, jobs in neighbouring towns require automobile transportation.[11]

The issue is exacerbated by the existence of a program rule that renders people ineligible for social assistance if they have more than $5000 of equity in a vehicle. Even if clients are able to keep their asset, many cannot afford maintenance, insurance or licensing while relying on social assistance. Therefore, they give up their vehicle.

Clients require adequate transportation to get to job interviews, training programs and work. They also need it to attend medical appointments, appointments with caseworkers, to get groceries and to the food bank and to take children to child care facilities, among other.things. I heard a lot about people spending hours every day walking from one place to another, leaving insufficient time to concentrate on getting a job. I heard it everywhere I went, each time with a different local perspective.

There is no singular solution to the problem of inadequate access to transportation; every community has different challenges, and the solutions must be found within the community and tailored to the individual circumstance.

Recommendations:

Revise eligibility rules to facilitate access to transportation	• Consider an increase in the allowable value of a vehicle.
Partner with municipalities to improve access to public transportation	• Continue to push for better public transit, especially improved access to industrial areas. • Consider providing free off-peak transit passes to social assistance recipients and/or people with disabilities.
Support transportation during post-employment transition period	• Provide transportation allowances for a period of transition after employment, until clients can make other arrangements. • Facilitate car-pooling. • Encourage employers located away from public transit routes to facilitate transportation.

e) Lack of affordable and safe child care

A substantial percentage (42%) of the Ontario Works caseload comprises children. Very simply, if child care needs are not met, parents can't work and remain stuck on social assistance, regardless of their desire to do otherwise.

[11] *For example, the Niagara Casino was looking to hire 3,000 people when they opened. Many of the jobs would have been appropriate for people in the OW caseload. However, due to transportation issues these jobs were not accessible to people without a vehicle.*

I heard about two major issues relating to how inadequate child care acts as a barrier to employment. Firstly, there is a lack of subsidized places in many communities, and secondly, even where there is child care available, it is rarely flexible enough to accommodate the hours of employment for many entry-level jobs, especially in the service or manufacturing sectors (e.g. hospitality, retail and health care).

Not only does inadequate access to child care prevent parents from working, it also prevents many from taking advantage of training and employment supports.

Ironically, parents receiving social assistance have improved access to subsidized child care because they are given priority status while they upgrade and find employment. However, once employment is secured, they lose that place and must go on a waiting list (often at a different centre which raises another set of problems) and so are not available to work because their child has no place to go. As a result, they bounce back to social assistance where they take more upgrading!

Caseworkers need the tools to help clients and their children with the transition from social assistance to employment.

I also heard that child care for infants is exceptionally difficult to find, and entirely unavailable in some places (such as Renfrew County). Transportation to and from child care facilities was also cited as an issue,[14] as were the rules governing subsidized child care for OW participants attending school.[15]

Recommendations:

Continue to improve child care for all Ontarians	• Increase the number of subsidized spaces. • Accommodate different hours of operation. • Improve access to infant care.
Support child care needs during post-employment transition period	• Continue access to child care support for a transition period once an individual is employed. • Provide consistency in the delivery of child care.

f) Deep and sustained poverty for current and future generations

I heard how deep and sustained poverty is in itself a barrier to employment. While the scope of this review did not include social assistance rates, people spoke passionately about the need to increase financial assistance arguing that low rates are a barrier to employment. People relying on social assistance are desperately trying to survive. Finding stable housing, enough food, and raising their children can exhaust all their energy, leaving nothing left for training and job searches. They have no energy left to think about what they need to do to improve their future.

I also heard concerns regarding the effects of poverty for the 158,00 children whose parents are on OW:

- Under current rates, it is impossible to provide children with proper nutrition necessary for optimal brain development and readiness to learn. Food banks and school nutrition programs help, but do not solve the problem.
- Substandard and/or unstable housing negatively affects the physical and mental health of children.
- Instability and stress associated with poverty negatively affect a child's ability to succeed in school.
- There is absolutely no money for "extras" such as sports and lessons, depriving children of opportunities to improve self-esteem and build friendship networks.

[14] I heard of some people who spent two hours travelling from the time they left home, transported their child to child care, and arrived at work. That journey was repeated, again at the end of the day.

[15] I was told by one client that child care was available to her only for hours spent in the classroom. That means that some clients do not qualify for child care because they do not meet the Eligible Hours of Care rule; furthermore, they are not able to do homework undisturbed by their child. However, I was also told that the rules were applied incorrectly here – again supporting the argument that rules need to be simple, clear and consistent. Staff training needs to be enhanced.

Given the effects of poverty on children, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) has recommended the implementation of a child benefit that stays with the child regardless of the source of income of the parents.

Recommendations:

Improve the standard of living for children of parents living on social assistance.	• Continue work with Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) to accomplish this goal. • Continue movement toward the elimination of the claw back of the National Child Benefit Supplement.
Consider implications of AMO recommendation to move toward a child benefit	• Work in partnership with the other levels of government and MCYS.
Recognize that low rates affect employability	• Trying to manage on low rates leave little time and energy to make the changes required to find work.

g) Undiagnosed mental health issues

Undiagnosed mental health problems present serious barriers to employment. Depression was identified both as a cause and consequence of reliance on social assistance.[1] Some stakeholders suggested that those who have been receiving social assistance for a lengthy period of time often have undiagnosed mental health issues that prevent them from working. Employment supports must recognize and address this pervasive issue.

Recommendations:

Continue to enhance community mental health programs.

Enhance caseworker awareness and referral capabilities.

[1] *Initial findings from the Peel Region Families First project suggest that 50% of sole support mothers suffer from depression.*

3. Provide the range of tools that people need to get to work

Our challenge is to give people the tools they need to move from social assistance to economic and social independence; to provide supports that are needed to move from being someone who costs the taxpayer money to someone who is a taxpayer. It is in our social and economic interest to maximize the potential of each person on social assistance; to give them the skills, education and support they need to be part of a healthy, vibrant economy. This section of the report deals with how those supports could be improved.

To provide successful supports, it must be recognized that people access social assistance for an array of reasons and with a multitude of both skills and barriers to employment. Employment supports must thus identify, address, and build on the individual circumstances of each client, in order to meet the needs of each person and have the flexibility required to accommodate individualized goals. Some people are job-ready; others have considerable work to do before they can be ready for full-time employment. Some have graduate degrees; others have very little formal education. Some people have the potential and desire to work in highly skilled full-time jobs, while for others part-time work is the best that can be managed at the time. Something all social assistance recipients do have in common, though, is that they are not currently able to support themselves in the labour market. Our challenge is to build on existing strengths and lower the barriers to employment.

Employment supports should be based on the recognition that employment is a process and not an event. The system must support the entire transition from social assistance to work, including post-employment supports, if our goal is sustained employment. Each client must develop a plan that is focused on getting ready for the next job, finding that job, and keeping the job once they have it. Supports must be developed within the context of local labour markets and be suited to the abilities and needs of the client.

This approach requires support from a funding model that rewards results, not activities, and by having well-trained front-line workers who are free to focus their time on helping individual clients achieve success.

We need to be strategic in how scarce dollars are spent and offer the most intensive employment supports to those who will benefit the most. We must also recognize the benefits of other initiatives that promote wellness and integration into the community.

Stakeholder Feedback:

a) Move to a client-centred approach that supports the entire transition to work

In order to address the real issues standing in the way of clients securing and maintaining employment we must move from the current punitive, cookie-cutter approach to the establishment of a supportive, client-centred approach with respect to employment supports. We need to understand the problems individuals face before we can help them find the solutions.

A number of issues facing clients can often stand in the way of employment. Family circumstances, health issues, housing and child care concerns sometimes need to be addressed before people can turn their energy towards getting to work.[17]

Not only are the barriers to employment different for different people but we also need to recognize that employment success is defined differently for people at various times in their lives. Full-time work is not always an immediately attainable goal. What is important, though, is that there is a plan in place to improve the likelihood of employment in the future. This plan could include, for example, achieving literacy targets, gaining relevant Canadian experience, securing stable housing or obtaining recognition for foreign-earned qualifications.

Obtaining and keeping part-time employment represents a success for some people, such as sole-support parents of young children or people who have been out of the labour market for a considerable length of time. There is great potential to increase the number of people working to supplement their social assistance cheque, as only 13% of OW clients are currently earning income from paid work. Given that OW participants are employable by definition, 'earners' represent a surprisingly small segment of the caseload. Working part-time is beneficial because it may increase the likelihood of full-time work, increase the standard of living, and reduce the costs to taxpayers.

I heard that the current approach of taking the "shortest route to employment" is considered by many to be counterproductive. Clients end up in short-term jobs that are not sustainable and consequently cycle in and out of the social assistance system.[18]

> *"We spend good money after bad. Repeating training and repeating the application".* – OW caseworker
>
> *"Some real good talent is being wasted out there."* – London ODSP client
>
> *"How many times should I have to take a resume-writing course?"* – OW participant

The following problems with the current employment supports were identified:

Current short-term training options fail to maximize client potential.

- The current range of training programs prepare people only for low-paying and/or part-time jobs.
- Waiting lists for many programs are very long.

Non-Canadian accreditation (professional and other) is often not recognized in Canada.

- Although a significant number of foreign-born clients have post-secondary education,[19] they need help to get foreign credentials recognized in Canada.

[17] The Toronto Enterprise Fund, which supports social purpose enterprises for low-income and homeless people, describes a "sustainability framework" in their Business of Inclusion reports, in which financial, social, personal, physical and human assets are assessed and, through interventions, enhanced. This captures the notion that there is far more to employability than simply job skills.

[18] Many people suggested that we must better track the number of people cycling in and out of the system in order to determine the success of employment supports.

[19] For example, in Ottawa I was told that 46% of the caseload is foreign born, and that 70% of those clients have post-secondary education.

Rules governing self-employment are unnecessarily restrictive.

- Self-employment is considered a valuable route to social independence for a surprisingly large number of clients, especially recent immigrants.

The importance of life-skills training is underestimated

- Some people need skills such as budgeting, financial literacy, interpersonal relations, anger management, home/work balance and others to maintain employment.

Encouragement can go a long way

- Having someone believe in you can sometimes be the spark that motivates success, especially if no one ever has before.

Time and money are being wasted on job placements and training that do not assist in the move towards job-readiness.[20]

- Community placements do contribute to employability in some circumstances, but often they are used only to fill quotas required for funding.

Employment supports are geared toward activities instead of employability goals.

- Waiting times for training courses are often very long, and under the current system participants must do some other activity, such as community placement, while they are waiting, even if that activity does not contribute to job-readiness.[21]

Finally, I heard that post-employment supports are critical if we want people to retain jobs, reducing their need to cycle in and out of the system. I heard from many that job retention is as important as getting a job, and that clients who have been out of the labour market for some time need help keeping their job once they get it. Participants noted that it can be difficult to get used to the routine and discipline of work, the stress of the workplace, and the added demands on one's time. Employers told me that poor attendance is one of the main reasons people are let go, but believe the issue could be alleviated with appropriate post-employment support. For example, we heard from an employer who has a designated contact person to deal with personnel issues as they arise, thus addressing the issues before they end in termination.

Different kinds of job-coaching and job-mentoring ideas were offered. For example, it was suggested that new employees check in with their case-worker or another mentor (perhaps a volunteer) once a day for the first four weeks, once a week for the next four months, and once a month until they have been working a year. The goal would be to identify problems early and develop strategies to ensure job retention. It was also suggested that we ask former OW recipients who have successfully transitioned to social and economic independence to act as mentors for clients employed in similar field.

"We need to put the 'social' back into 'social services'." (Sudbury caseworker and trainee)

[20] For example, some placements offer lots of seasonal work, but very little between seasons. Participants are still required to participate in programs if there are no other job opportunities in the community, even if they will be working in the near future.

[21] I learned of a 63-year-old man waiting for heart surgery that was enrolled in a training program. I was told that some community organizations become dependent on unpaid labour, and others said that they need more money to supervise and train people on community placements. I also heard about someone who was doing a wonderful job in her community placements. She was a very valuable addition to the organization she was working at. But she was on her fifth placement at the same place, and showing no signs of moving toward employment. While the placement had real value for both the participant and the organization, it did not improve her employability. In effect, it was a social support rather than an employment support.

Recommendations:

All applicants should begin with a job readiness assessment	• Develop or use assessment similar to EAST.[22] • In some cases, a more intensive psychosocial evaluation would be required to identify barriers to employment not captured by skills assessment.
Develop an individualized plan with each client	• Employment plans should be developed based on client's strengths, needs and goals, with the emphasis on reducing barriers to employment within the local labour market and maximizing the potential of the individual. • There is joint responsibility for achieving success. Plans need to clearly state the client's responsibilities. • Part-time work should be encouraged and considered a step toward full-time employment. • Progress toward achieving the goals set out in the plan would be expected. • The plan would be kept on file for future reference, so that clients who return to the system would get back on the plan without repeating unnecessary steps.
Recognize that there is more to job-readiness than skills-training	• Social supports and life-skills training are sometimes as important as an initial step before skills training and employment supports can be effective. • Social isolation and feelings of uselessness can be an enormous barrier to gaining employment. • A focus on social inclusion and building networks of informal support and friendship can have real value.[23]
Ensure adequate support throughout the process	• Caseworkers should spend sufficient time with clients to set goals and develop a plan to move toward sustainable employment. • Intensive case management should be offered to all caseworkers. • Utilize volunteers to provide mentoring programs.
Consider the context of the local labour market	• Each market has limitations and opportunities. • Labour market information is often outdated and not specific enough. • Connections with Economic Development departments and Boards of Trade are needed.

[22] *Developed by Toronto Social Services, the EAST tool includes a series of nine questions to quickly determine job readiness and provide the basis for a Participation Agreement.*

[23] *One terrific example of social inclusion I saw in action was the Picton Ontario Works Steering Committee. It is composed of current and former Ontario Works clients. They fulfill their community placement requirements through participation in this group. They determine a need in the community, develop a plan to fill that need, and then carry it through to completion. Some of their projects include bingo nights and pet visits at nursing homes, running a haunted house, and running a catering company. Visiting them was a highlight of my tour. Another example of a program that works is The Family and Students Together program is run by Family Services London at several local schools. It brings ten students and their families together with principals and teachers for a group meal and weekly counselling session for eight weeks. The sessions are then followed by monthly meetings. Often the groups continue to meet for years afterwards and become a strong social network that provides support in times of need.*

Recommendations:

Build relationships with local employers	• Ensure they understand the potential of the people on social assistance. • Develop partnerships so programs are tailored to employer needs. • Establish strong post-employment supports.
Improve employment supports and training opportunities	• Remove disincentives for completion of basic education.[24] • Increase time permitted for on-the-job experience to three months (currently six weeks). • Allow clients to continue ESL training until they are competent – the current time allowance is insufficient. • Break down silos between MCSS and the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) to support clients in reaching their full potential. • Improve access to intensive training programs - make training programs available to all Ontarians, regardless of their source of income. • Create one-stop shopping for people wanting to upgrade skills. • Co-ordinate and streamline job development functions to avoid duplication and unnecessary competition. • Offer ODSP employment supports to all social assistance recipients.[25]
Consider offering more incentives for participating in specialized programs	• Offer limited number of places in intensive programs (e.g. apprenticeships). • Select participants most highly motivated and dedicated to achieve success. • Pay additional allowance to participants. • Continuation in program is contingent upon meeting requirements.
Encourage innovation and self-employment	• Re-examine rules that limit opportunities for self-employment.
Offer strong post-employment supports	• Assist with transportation, child care and health benefits while clients become established in their jobs. • Develop job-coaching and job-mentoring initiatives.

[24] *Currently, in Toronto, for example, clients at school are ineligible for the $100/month transportation allowance that is available to people in other employment support programs.*

[25] *Programs are currently available to ODSP clients only, even though they are theoretically less able to work than OW clients.*

"We need more carrot, less stick."

b) Review the current funding model for social assistance

"There is too much focus on keeping people busy, meeting quotas, instead of moving them forward." (Scarborough caseworker)

I heard from front-line staff and others that the current funding model rewards activities, not results, that it is counterproductive and complicated to administer, and that people are pushed to enroll in programs that do not move them toward employment or employability in order to meet "quotas". I was also told that the current levels of funding do not reflect the hard-to-serve caseload of today. Many suggested that MCSS should consider eliminating funding based on levels of service: the current model means that "too much time is spent on deciding levels of service. It's way too complex." However, if the current funding model is retained, the amounts for Level 1 are inadequate and need to be increased. It was also suggested that MCSS should establish a funding relationship with municipalities that allows flexibility to meet local demands and more room for innovation and building local community capacity.

Recommendations:

Review the current Levels of Service funding model	• Consider changing to a model that rewards results, not activities, and allows flexibility for innovation.

c) Provide adequate training for caseworkers

Throughout the discussions caseworkers indicated a need and desire for more training. I heard from clients, caseworkers and community groups that many caseworkers do not know about all of the options available to clients. As a result, there is inconsistency in how the program is delivered and the rules applied, and clients are not made aware of the range of programs and supports available to them.

I also heard that caseworkers need to be taught how to address the needs of the client and to deliver supports in a supportive, uncritical manner.

Intensive case management training was extremely well received: "It took us back to why we are here." (OW caseworker)

I heard that local staff should be given more discretion to address the needs of the individual client. If there is something that will help someone move forward, then we should seriously consider granting it. We should allow local staff the opportunity to help their clients, not just administer a program.

Recommendations:

Offer intensive case management to more front-line staff, including Customer Service training.

4. Simplify program rules and streamline administration

There was probably nothing I heard about more than the need to simplify the rules. The current system is very heavily burdened with rules that are enormously time-consuming to administer. Simplifying the rules would have the advantage of focusing resources where they are most effective in helping people move to employment. To illustrate the potential cost-savings in rule simplification, I was told that one minor rule change required an additional 2.5 full-time staff to administer in one office alone.

There are now approximately 800 rules and regulations within the system that must be applied before a client's eligibility and the amount of their monthly cheque can be determined. Many of those rules are punitive and designed not to support people, but rather to keep them out of the system. Because there are so many rules, they are expensive to administer and often applied inconsistently from one caseworker to another, even within the same office. Further, the rules are so complicated that they are virtually impossible to communicate to clients, and it takes years to train a caseworker.

Throughout this report there are specific recommendations about rules that should be changed or eliminated; however, it is well beyond the scope of this review to identify all the rules that deserve attention. There is virtually unanimous support for a complete review of all rules, with the goal of simplifying the process and ending redundant and unnecessary administrative work. Rule changes should be considered within the context of a cost/benefit analysis, such that administrative savings associated with the elimination of rules are included in the calculation of the cost of changing a rule. Thus, a rule change that saves $1000 but costs $2000 in staff time to administer should be eliminated if cost reduction is the intention.

Stakeholder Feedback:

Front-line workers told me they spend at least 80% of their time on administrative issues – filling out forms, photocopying documentation, and responding to the demands of Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT) – leaving very little time to address the needs of the clients and help them move toward employment. Freeing caseworkers from unnecessary administrative burdens would enable more frequent contact, stronger relations, and the addressing of barriers to employment and economic independence. Caseworkers and clients told me that caseloads are too high (given the demands of SDMT) to permit the kind of personal relationships necessary to make progress. Caseworkers very much want to reduce the administrative work that keeps them from focussing on employment supports.

The rules regarding applications are unnecessarily onerous, especially for particular groups such as people with poor language skills or the homeless. In addition, since the current system treats someone who has been off OW for more than one month as a new applicant, there are potential savings that could be generated if the system recognized that cycling in and out is a common reality in some labour markets and within certain target groups.

The Intake Screening Units (ISUs) were also identified as an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, and many recommended that they be closed altogether. They are seen as having no use and in fact can cause more work for caseworkers. In addition, they are frustrating for applicants, especially those with weak English skills. In some offices, when people come in to apply they call the ISU from a special room and go through the pre-screening before they meet with the intake worker who is right across the hall and asks the same questions all over again.

SDMT was constantly singled out as a tool that consumes too much valuable time. Throughout the province, I heard that it is extremely frustrating to use, dominates front-line resources, and gets in the way of providing necessary supports to clients. SDMT primarily handles the financial assistance part of the program – it applies the 800 rules. However, since it does not contain much information related to employment supports, it is of limited use in helping people get work or understanding the barriers they face. There are also significant technical problems when a person moves from OW to ODSP. Some suggested that SDMT should be replaced altogether. However, since it is a tool that verifies eligibility, not employability, it may be appropriate for that limited use. Alternatively, if rules are simplified and the process is streamlined it could become less of a burden to front-line staff.

> *"It's [SDMT] a dog's breakfast. A huge stumbling block on a daily basis. There has to be an ability to override it. It acts as a deterrent to delivering service."*
> (Scarborough caseworker)

Recommendations:

Close Intake Screening Units	
Establish a task force to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of existing rules, with the goal of streamlining administration and eliminating unnecessary rules	• Determine which rules and administrative processes can be simplified and/or eliminated. Some examples include: - Allow visual verification instead of photocopying and filing paper. - Simplify the re-application process to save time and aggravation. - Consider a flat-rate shelter allowance or eliminate the separate allowance altogether.
Allow more flexibility with program administration	• Allow local offices to address the specific needs of their clients.
Reconsider the value of SDMT in the employment assistance process	• SDMT should serve caseworkers as a support to administer, not drive, programs. • Upon a review of the rules, consider retiring SDMT.

5. Eliminate punitive rules that act as disincentives to economic independence

The previous section deals with eliminating rules that cost more to administer than they save. This section deals with the elimination of rules that make it very difficult for people to work their way out of social assistance and back to independence. In many cases, the rules keep entire families stuck in the cycle of poverty. Our goal should be to support families while they become self-sufficient.

Stakeholder Feedback:

a) Asset levels

Current eligibility requirements for OW dictate that clients have virtually no assets when they enter the system, while other rules dictate that they have none when they exit. As a result, many people leave the system in a very precarious situation, just one unexpected expense away from returning to reliance on social assistance. Some stakeholders suggested that clients be allowed and even encouraged to build their assets, so they have some cushion on which to fall back.

Rules that prevent saving toward future education should be eliminated immediately.

Recommendations:

Consider reforms with respect to asset levels and limits

- Change asset rules regarding benefits to provide a reasonable cushion for unexpected expenses.
- Encourage debt consolidation loans at lower rates of interest; don't consider them as income.
- Allow parents to keep RESPs for childrens' education.[26]
- Allow recipients' children to save money without penalty to the family.[27]
- Allow students receiving OSAP to stay at home without penalty to parents' eligibility.
- Do not count scholarships and bursaries as income for parents of students.
- Allow people to keep vehicles, especially where public transit is not available.
- Eliminate liens on homes.

b) Family and community support

We all need to count on others for help and support from time to time. This is probably most true for someone living on social assistance; however, many of the current rules discourage support from friends and families. In addition, there are opportunities to encourage broader community participation in support of our clients. Tremendous community resources exist and many people want to be part of the solution.[28] All sectors – employers, social service agencies, universities, and others – should be invited to participate in addressing social issues[29].

[26] One group suggested that we consider matching RESP contributions. A program called Pathways to Education in Regent Park currently works with grade nine students – students are given $1,000 a year toward their RESP.

[27] The current rule is that when children earn money and spend it, it isn't considered income, yet savings are considered a family asset and can disqualify the family from social assistance.

[28] One example I heard about involved a program similar to Big Sisters that matches experienced mothers with young mothers on social assistance to provide encouragement, advice and support.

[29] Ottawa appears to have a good example of how community partnering can yield very positive results, including the establishment of a program at Queen's University to fast-track foreign-trained teachers.

Recommendations:

Eliminate rules that discourage and/or punish supportive families.[30]

- Allow clients to accept reasonable gifts without penalty.
- Eliminate the dependent adult category and treat all adults as independent.[31]

[30] In one example the value of leftovers from Sunday dinner at a parent's house was deducted from the social assistance cheque.

[31] A mother and her 1-year-old son left an abusive relationship and moved into a shelter. After the maximum 6-week stay, she moved in with her mother until she could figure out what to do next. Her mother was not in a position to financially support her daughter and grandchild, but could provide a safe, warm, temporary place to stay. Under the "living with parents" policy and because her mother was not charging her rent, the maximum allowance was $50. But, because she received $238.66 from the Child Tax Benefit, she was found to be ineligible for OW. She decided to return to her abusive partner (Muskoka). Another woman in her late 50s shared her story of having to move back with her mother, a pensioner living on a very modest income, and being forced to depend on her mother's very limited resources, thus lowering her mother's already low standard of living (Toronto).

6. Change internal and external attitudes about social assistance recipients

At the foundation of all the changes recommended in this report is the fundamental need to change internal and external attitudes about who social assistance recipients are, why they are on social assistance and what they have to offer society. For the past several years, government leaders have made deriding social assistance recipients a core component of their political strategy. Their ideology has driven the entire system – the rules, the attitudes, and the administration. Reinforcing negative stereotypes has done serious damage to people who work and live in the system. It has permeated into the employment market, so that employers are not inclined to hire social assistance recipients. We need to communicate – within and without – that the vast majority of people on social assistance desperately want to be self-sufficient; many have valuable abilities and skills, and are ready to get to work once the barriers are lifted.

We need to treat people with respect and dignity, and we need to offer hope for a better future and the supports to get there.

Stakeholder Feedback:

Many people told me that attitudes need to change from the very top on down. That starts with the political leadership. It continues right through to front line workers who need intensive training on treating recipients with respect and being supportive. They suggested we need to end the rules, language and attitudes that imply everyone is trying to cheat the system. Changing attitudes and messaging will also encourage employers to become partners in providing opportunities for clients who are often productive workers. We need to offer opportunities and hope for a better future, not further humiliation.

> *"I felt bad enough, I didn't need anyone else telling me how bad a failure I was."* (former OW recipient, mother of two)

> *"You need to be your strongest when you are your weakest", because of the humiliation experienced when applying for OW.* (former OW recipient)

> *"The system is designed to exclude – to give people the least amount of support possible".* (front-line worker)

Social assistance recipients should be treated with respect and dignity. Many are on social assistance through no fault of their own - certainly the 198,000 children have no choice in the matter - and all are struggling with the stigma of social assistance. It should be recognized that no one wants to be reliant on social assistance. For many recipients, everything in their life has fallen apart, they consider themselves to be total failures, and they are living on inadequate amounts of money. It is our responsibility to offer the tools they need to improve their lives.

> *"People will meet the expectations that are set for them. The expectations have been pretty nasty in the past."* (caseworker)

A sentiment expressed by both caseworkers and clients is that clients are afraid of their caseworkers. Caseworkers are seen as people with the power to cut clients off from assistance, as opposed to people with the power to help them move toward employment and independence. Some clients noted that they are afraid to ask questions for fear it might result in their assistance being terminated. When they do ask questions clients sometimes get different answers from different workers. Some caseworkers believe it is very difficult for clients to look for a job when they are worried about constant verifications and disentitlement.

Social assistance recipients face uncertainty and instability. Social assistance cheques and drug benefits are often the only security that clients have. The fear of jeopardizing that security, combined with the punitive nature of the current program and the confusion around the rules, results in undue reliance on word-of-mouth information.

Stakeholders suggested that OW offices need to be more user-friendly and less intimidating. It was suggested that office hours should reflect needs of clients (7am-6pm) and that the offices be more welcoming and user-friendly. One client recommended that MCSS put artwork of clients on the walls, and that MCSS pay attention to the psychological state of people as they arrive at the office.

Communication with the client is severely limited. One client said that she got into a program that was very helpful but only because she overheard someone else talking about it. She suggested that there be a newsletter informing clients about available workshops and other opportunities.

Recommendations:

Change the approach and messaging regarding social assistance	• Encourage politicians and community leaders to look beyond the stereotypes and understand the challenges and opportunities facing people on social assistance. • Consider sponsoring the production of a play called "Danny's Basement" about what it is like for a child on social assistance (St. Theresa School, Etobicoke) and other cultural expressions that foster an understanding of what it is like for children living on social assistance.
Position OW offices as the place to access the required supports	• Consider ways to make the offices more client-friendly, including longer hours of service. • Produce brochures that clearly and simply outline rules, services and responsibilities in various languages. • Facilitate the communication of information to clients through newsletters, posters, etc.[32] • Rewrite form letters to be more positive in tone and more informative in content. • Consider implementing more tools and services in French and other languages.
Enhance caseworker training	• Train front-line staff to be helpful and to treat clients with respect. • Ensure caseworkers are aware of programs available to clients.

[32] *For example, I was told that the Royal Bank will cash social assistance cheques at no cost, in contrast to other high-cost cheque-cashing companies.*

7. Improve relationships with employers, partners, other ministries and other levels of government.

MCSS cannot do it alone. We need to actively develop partnerships with those who can play a role in supporting our clients in their move from social assistance to employment. These partners include employers, labour unions, other ministries, other levels of government and other partners in the community.

All employment supports are directed at securing a job. Thus, it only makes sense that knowing where those jobs are is vital to success. Relationships with employers vary tremendously from place to place across Ontario. Some municipalities have very close relationships with Economic Development Offices, while others have none at all. Some municipalities actively search out partnerships with employers, while others do not. Relationships with employers must be fostered if training is to have any value. The impending job crunch may be our biggest ally as the labour skills shortage increases demand for workers, but we need to capitalize on it.

We can learn from and build on the accomplishments of very successful business/OW partnerships that I heard about, e.g. Mandarin Garden in Brampton; Canadian Tire Financial Services in Welland; call centres in Kingston, North Bay and Sudbury; and the Chatham-Kent economic development strategy.

Stakeholder Feedback:

a) Employers

Existing companies create most new jobs; therefore, relationships with existing local employers are essential. Employers need to know that clients receiving social assistance are a great source of potential labour. At the same time, employers were adamant that "we are not social workers". They want employees who will show up when they are supposed to, work well with their co-workers, do their job and bring with them the basic life skills necessary to succeed in a workplace environment. While employers are more than willing to train new employees in the specifics of their jobs, they do not want to instruct employees on matters such as personal hygiene and interpersonal relations, nor do they want to worry about issues such as housing and child care problems. Therefore, clients need to have the necessary life skills prior to placement, and should be supported until they are well established in their jobs.

Employers are concerned about a shortage of workers, and are anxious to develop partnerships to meet their needs. They identified interest in pursuing opportunities to develop internships, job shadowing, co-ops and apprenticeships. The Ontario Public Service (OPS) should "lead the way" in job placements, along with transfer-payment agencies and large institutions like banks.

Employers also identified the complexity of employment programs as a barrier to their participation. They suggested that the government simplify the programs and end the confusion around the multitude of programs under various federal departments and provincial ministries.

b) Labour unions

Labour unions should be encouraged to become partners in the training and employment of clients. Their cooperation is necessary in order to access opportunities in unionized workplaces and apprenticeship programs. Unions provide access to well-paid jobs, and many unions are very concerned about the impending shortage of skilled trades. They are actively recruiting, and apprenticeships represent an excellent training opportunity.

One large employer anticipated "serious problems with the unions" if he participated in an employment training and support program for social assistance recipients. He suggested that government must bring the unions to the table.

c) Other ministries

As mentioned earlier, several other ministries have responsibilities for issues that directly affect our clients. Child care, transportation, housing, health care, adult education and many other issues are outside the direct mandate of MCSS, but nevertheless directly affect the well-being of people on social assistance and their ability to move to employment.

Links with these ministries must be actively fostered, and solutions developed co-operatively.

d) Other levels of government

Unite all levels of government under one employment-enhancement program, involving a seamless integration of training opportunities available to all Ontarians, regardless of their source of income. As with other ministries, we need stronger links and better co-operation with other levels of government. There is no sense duplicating services – it is both expensive and confusing.

e) Community Organizations

Government cannot and should not provide all the services needed to adequately support people on social assistance. There is an important role for community-based and volunteer organizations that provide supports that go beyond the government's mandate. We need to capitalize on the front line expertise of these organizations to effectively design and deliver programs aimed at particular target groups.

Recommendations:

Identify and respond to skills shortages in local labour markets	• Improve communication with employers. • Understand and respond to their current and anticipated labour needs.
Market employment support programs to employers	• Remove "welfare stigma" – foster better understanding of client abilities and potential. • Educate employers about the caseload as a potential labour supply.
Consider enhanced incentives for employers	• Encourage employers to hire harder-to-employ clients and train them for long-term employment. • Wage subsidies could, in some cases, be an alternative to earnings exemptions.
Facilitate "one-stop" shopping for employers	• Consider the consolidation of various targeted employment programs. • Coordinate programs from all levels of government.
Partner with labour unions to provide better opportunities	• This could help address the skills trade shortage.
Continue to break down silos between ministries and levels of government	• Working together to provide better results for less money will benefit everybody.

With a paycheque comes dignity.

(Community trainer)

8. Evaluate Programs and Policies

There is inadequate, if any, evaluation of current employment support programs. Indeed, few programs even have clear, measurable goals. However, many of the pilot studies discussed and initiatives from other jurisdictions incorporate stringent program evaluations in their model. I heard much about the fallacy of using participation in activities and caseload size as proxies for program success. While moving to full-time employment is certainly the ultimate goal, other successes that move one to employability, such as achieving functional literacy or Grade 12 equivalency, should also be recognized as important, valid outcomes of specific programs.

Stakeholder Feedback:

Objectives need to be clearly defined for all programs, and then measurement needs to be carried out to see how well those objectives are being met. The long-term objective of the programs is sustained employment, but there are many shorter-term objectives that lead toward that goal through improved employability. We need to decide what they are and how to measure them.

The current measure of how well employment supports are working is simply the number of people on the caseload. It needs to be recognized that people move on and off social assistance for many reasons, and other evaluations of the success of various programs are needed. Similarly, the number of people involved in activities, such as community placements and workshops, is simply a measure of activity, and not a measure of progress towards employment.

We need to take a multi-year longitudinal approach to research to understand long-term outcomes and capture information about cycling in and out of the social assistance system.

Also, when measuring program effectiveness all societal costs and savings, including health care, police/judicial, effect on children, and ability to become taxpayers should be incorporated.

Programs should be targeted toward a specific sub-group within the caseload: "one-size-fits-all" programs do not fit anyone well. If supports do not achieve the desired result for a given sub-group, the ministry should not waste time and money on those supports.

In addition, we should take advantage of the tremendous research capabilities of our universities and other research organizations. There is considerable money spent researching topics of interest to policy analysts; we should encourage research of topics that may influence program development.

Recommendations:

Move to evidence-based employment programs

- Partner in research projects to obtain empirical evidence to support targeted programming.
- Research to understand long-term outcomes and capture information about cycling in and out of the system.

Link with researchers at universities and elsewhere

- Host an annual conference where academics and other researchers are invited to share their findings related to social assistance and explore potential research opportunities, given the research needs of the Ministry.[35]
- Fund research so that MCSS can better understand its clients, their needs, and the effectiveness of programs.

[35] *In Britain the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) holds an annual conference by THE CENTRE FOR THE WIDER BENEFITS OF LEARNING (WBL) to investigate the full range of benefits that learning brings both to the individual learner and society as a whole.*

Conclusion

First, let me thank you for giving me the opportunity to undertake this review. It has been an extraordinary learning experience and I have been enormously impressed by the people I have met. Their dedication, their willingness to offer their opinions openly, and their determination to improve the well-being of the people living on the edge has impacted me greatly. MCSS is fortunate to work with an exceptional group of people – members of the Ontario Public Service, people on the front lines in municipal offices, community groups and clients – all who want nothing more than to move forward with improving the lives of people receiving social assistance. I was also greatly impressed with the clients I met. They willingly shared their stories and their dreams with me and they, too, are determined to move forward.

While the recommendations contained in this report may seem ambitious, I believe they are all achievable, even within current financial constraints. If MCSS is successful in simplifying the rules and streamlining the administration, a substantial amount of resources can instead be spent on working directly with clients, addressing the immediate issues that have contributed to their need to access social assistance in the first place. Unless MCSS addresses the root issues, clients will continue to cycle in and out of the system and the intergenerational patterns of dependence on social assistance that I heard about throughout the review will continue. I am convinced that by working together with clients and community partners we can offer hope, inclusion and a better future.

List of Contributors

I would like to sincerely thank all of the people who made this report possible. This is only a partial list of contributors. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the candid contributions from caseworkers, administrators, clients, community workers, and many other individuals who shared their experiences, observations and ideas with me. Below is a list of organizations I met with or that were represented at meetings.

Chatham/Kent

- CAN AM Recycling
- Economic Development Services
- Hillerich & Bradsby of Canada Limited
- Ontario Federation of Labour
- Ontario Works Staff
- YA Canada Corporation

Hamilton/Niagara

- Business and Opportunities Niagara
- Campaign for Adequate Welfare and Disability Benefits
- Canadian Tire Financial Services Customer Relationship Contact
- City of Hamilton Employment & Social Support Services
- City of Hamilton Public Health and Community Services
- Employment Links, Lewis and Lewis Limited
- McMaster University & Settlement and Integration Services Organization
- McQuesten Legal and Community Centre
- Municipal Services Unit
- Niagara Health Services
- Ontario Association of Social Workers – Hamilton and District Branch
- Regional Municipality of Niagara – Community Services Department
- Regional Municipality of Niagara – Social Assistance & Employment Opportunities Division
- Social Action Committee
- Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton
- YMCA of Niagara Employment Services

London

- ACFO London-Sarnia
- Boys' and Girls' Club of London
- Centre for Lifelong Learning
- Family Services London
- Fanshawe College
- Goodwill Industries
- Leads Employment Services London
- London Interfaith Counselling Centre
- London Unemployment Help Centre
- Neighbourhood Legal Services London and Middlesex
- Nokee Kwe Occupational Skill Development
- Ontario Works
- Pathways Skill Development and Placement Centre
- Small Business Centre
- Sodexho
- Thames Valley District School Board
- WIL Employment Connections
- Youth Opportunities Unlimited

Kitchener

- House Of Friendship
- Lang's Farm
- Catholic Family Counselling Centre
- Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre
- KW-YWCA
- KW-YMCA
- KW Counselling
- Opportunities Waterloo Region
- Community Safety and Crime Prevention Council
- City of Kitchener
- Ontario Trillium Foundation
- United Way of Kitchener Waterloo
- Food Bank of Waterloo Region
- KDBA Streetworker

- The Working Centre
- Multicultural Society
- Social Planning Council
- COO-Lutherwood
- Region of Waterloo, Social Services
- Regional Municipality of Waterloo

Muskoka

- Bracebridge Muskoka Lakes Secondary School
- Chamber of Commerce
- Community Learning Centre
- Georgian College
- Gravenhurst High School
- Gravenhurst Opera House & Arts Centre
- HRDC
- Huntsville High School
- Lindsay Adult Education and Training Centre
- Literacy Society of South Muskoka
- Local Training and Adjustment Board
- Muskoka Community Services
- Muskoka Homelessness
- Muskoka Literacy Council
- Muskoka Staffing
- Muskoka Tourism
- OPP – Canine Unit
- Provincial Court
- St. Dominic Secondary School
- Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board
- YMCA
- YMCA Women's Resoucre Centre

Nipissing

- Best Western North Bay
- Canadore College
- Clarion Resort
- College Boreal
- Conseil Scolaire Catholique Franco-Nord
- Conseil Scolaire Public du Nord - Est de l'Ontario
- Dave Vaillancourt, Team Coordinator
- District of Nipissing Social Service Administration Board
- ETI Canada Inc.
- Fabrene Inc.
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Inn on the Bay
- Local Training and Adjustment Board
- Near North District School Board
- Nipissing University
- Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board
- North Bay General Hospital
- Office of Monique Smith, MPP
- Ontario Northland Transportation Commission
- Telespectrum
- Teletech North Bay
- Tembec Inc.
- YES Employment Services Inc.

Northumberland

- Child Development Centre – Clare Paterson, Executive Director
- Community Employment Resource Office
- Community Training and Development Centre
- Fleming College
- Haliburton Kawartha, Pineridge, District Health Unit
- Help Centre of Northumberland
- MSCC Central East Regional Office
- North Legal Centre
- Northumberland Coalition Against Poverty
- Northumberland Community Future Development Corp.
- Northumberland Community Legal Centre
- Northumberland County
- Northumberland of United Way
- Office of Lou Rinaldi, MPP
- Ontario Works Steering Committee
- Salvation Army Northumberland
- Sharon Chadwick, Income Case Worker
- Sue Van Allen, Homelessness Case Worker
- Watton Employment Services

Ottawa

- Centre des Services Communitaires de Vanier
- City of Cornwall
- City of Ottawa

- County of Renfrew
- CSC Vanier
- Gar White
- John Howard Society
- Aboriginal Employment and Training (Kingston)
- Lasi World Skills
- MCSS
- United Counties of Prescott Russell
- United Way – City of Ottawa

Peel

- Families First Program
- Open the Door Program
- Peel Children's Services
- Suzanne Finn, Supervisor
- Tracey Ciccarelli-Ridsill, Caseworker
- Valerie Elliston, Caseworker

Prince Edward, Lennox and Addington

- Assurant Solutions
- City of Kingston
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Kagita Mikam
- KEDCO
- KEYS
- Lance Thurston
- MCSS
- Ontario Works staff
- PELASS
- Prince Edward, Lennox and Addington County
- St. Lawrence College
- Startek

Sudbury

- Cambrian College of Applied Arts and Technology
- City of Sudbury
- Collège Boréal
- HRSD
- Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
- ODSP managers and employment supports staff
- Ontario March of Dimes
- Ontario Works staff
- Sudbury Human Resource Centre of Canada
- Youth Employment Agency
- YMCA Sudbury Employment & Career Services

Toronto

- City of Toronto
- Daily Bread Food Bank
- Dixon Community Centre
- East York Social Services
- Etobicoke South Social Services
- Family Service Association
- Job Start
- LAMP
- Rexdale Community Legal Clinic
- Rexdale Community Health Centre
- Rexdale Community Micro-skills Development Centre
- Scarborough Social Services
- Social and Enterprise Development Innovations
- Somali Women's Association
- South Etobicoke Community Legal Services
- St. Christopher House
- Stonegate Community Association
- Storefront Humber
- Willowridge Information and Recreation Centre
- YWCA

Provincial Organizations

- Association of Municipalities Ontario
- Ontario Association of Social Workers
- Ontario Dental Association

Written Reports

- A Profile of Sponsored Immigrant and Refugee Claimant Cases on Social Assistance. Statistics and Analysis Unit of the Ontario Disability Support Program Branch. March 2003.
- After Ontario Works: A Survey of People Who Left Ontario Works in Toronto in 2001 by Toronto Community and Neighbourhood Services.
- Annual Food Bank Report on Hunger in Ontario, 2003. Ontario Association of Food Banks.
- Can Work Incentives Pay for Themselves? A final report on the Self-Sufficiency Project for Welfare Applicants is sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada. October 2003.
- Daily Bread Food Bank Submission Report: Improving Employment Outcomes in Social Assistance by the Department of Research and Education on Poverty of the Daily Bread Food Bank. June 11, 2004.
- Discouraged, Diverted and Disentitled: Ontario Works New Service Delivery Model by Dean Heard and Andrew Mitchell.
- First Steps: Recommendations for Social Assistance Reform prepared by the Income Security Advocacy Centre and Steering Committee on Social Assistance. April 2004.
- Innovation and Looking Ahead: One Step and Ontario Works at the Crossroad. Ontario network of employment skills training project. June 2000.
- Life After Welfare: The Economic Well Being of Welfare Leavers in Canada during the 1990s. Marc Frenette and Garnett Picot of the Business and Labour Market Analysis Division of Statistics Canada. March 2003.
- Lifelong Learning: Recent Research Results. Learning Policy Directorate, HRDC. June 14, 2004.
- National Council of Welfare's Welfare-to-Work Roundtable of June 7 & 8, 2002, Ottawa-Hull. National Council of Welfare Reports.
- National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth in Transition Survey: Highlights. Learning Policy Directorate. HRDC. 2004.
- Oacas Journal. The Voice of Child Welfare in Ontario. Winter 2003-2004 issues, vol. 47, number 3.
- Ontario Association of Food Banks: Annual Food bank Report on Hunger in Ontario, 2003.
- Paths to Employment in Southeast Downtown Toronto: An Employment Linkage Proposal Combining Employment Preparation, Employment Supports, Transitional Jobs and Employment Placement by Tom Zizys. March 20, 2004.
- Reconnecting Social Assistance Recipients to the Labour Market. Evaluation and Data Development Strategic Policy. Human Resources Development Canada. March 2000.
- Report on the Social Assistance Review Committee: Transitions. The Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services.
- Screening and Assessment in TANF/Welfare-to-Work, Ten Important Questions TANF Agencies and Their Partners Should Consider. 2001.
- Screening and Assessment in TANF/Welfare-to-Work. Local Answers to Difficult Questions. Administration for Children and Families and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. December 2001.

- Social Assistance Reform and Paid Work prepared by the Income Security Advocacy Centre and Steering Committee on Social Assistance. April 2004.
- St. Christopher House: "What Works When Work Doesn't": Income Strategies For Working-Age Adults. Spring 2004
- Survey of Individuals Who Left Social Assistance. Eros Research Associates Inc. 1998.
- TANF Client Assessments: Program Philosophies and Goals, Sequencing of Process, Uses of Information and State Changes or Modifications, Promising Practices, and Lessons Learned.
- Targeting Services in the Individual Customer Strategy: the Role of Profiling. A Review of Research Evidence. Warwick Institute for Employment Research. University of Warwick.
- Walking on Eggshells: Abused Women's Experiences of Ontario's Welfare System prepared by Janet Mosher, Patricia Evans, Margaret Little, Eileen Morrow, Jo-Anne Boulding and Nancy VanderPlaats. April 5, 2004
- Wasted Skills. Foreign Trained Physicians and the Costs of Accreditation: A Participatory Action Research Project with Immigrant Women Physicians in Hamilton by Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Denise Maraj and Barbara Dabrowski-Chudyk. June 2000.
- We Are Making a Difference: The Women's Worksite Action Group: A Participatory Action Research Project by Maroussia Hadjukowski-Ahmed, Myrna Pond, Isik Urla Zeytinoglu, Lori Chambers. December 1999.
- Woman Abuse and Ontario Works: Rural Women Speak about their Experiences with Ontario Works prepared by Colleen Purdon, Project Coordinator. November 2003.

I heard from many community organizations that were very happy to have the opportunity for input and very much want to continue to be part of the process of improving supports for the most vulnerable. Community organizations and policy experts have written extensive material on social assistance programs. Below is a brief synopsis of seven particularly relevant studies that relate to my review of OW and ODSP employment supports:

Ontario Association of Food Banks, Annual Food Bank Report on Hunger in Ontario, 2003.

- 308,452 people in Ontario used a food bank in March, 2003.
- 47% of food bank users participate in Ontario Works.
- Children represent 41% of food bank users; 40% go hungry at least once a month.
- Most food banks give less than 5 day supply, once a month.

Outline of Report's Recommendations

1. Radically revamp Ontario's income support approach to one that provides greater opportunity for the poor by combining adequate income with training and education programs to facilitate self-sufficiency.
2. Raise the shelter limit on social assistance to reflect the actual cost of housing in communities.
3. Move quickly to end the claw back of the National Child Benefit.
4. Ensure adequate income for working poor families.
5. Create more affordable housing.
6. Repeal the Tenant Protection Act.
7. Improve opportunities for training and skills education.
8. Streamline access to ODSP, and provide adequate benefits.

Tom Zizys, Paths to Employment in Southeast Downtown Toronto: an employment linkage proposal combining employment preparation, employment supports, transitional jobs and employment placement.

The member partners of DECDC serve a population of whom many face significant and often multiple barriers to employment: individuals and neighbourhoods experiencing long-term poverty; people with lower levels of education and skills, with limited work histories; new immigrants to Canada; homeless people.

There are many projects (particularly in the United States) which offer a compelling model for a program which would seed to provide successful pathways to employment for such a community. The significant lessons of those experiences strongly suggest the following:

- The approach must be designed as a broad system as opposed to an individual project; it needs to involve a number of partners and a number of components, as the sum of activities and programs is unlikely to be found within one organization or within the scope of one jurisdiction;
- That system needs to integrate a continuum of social, personal and employment supports, though pre-employment preparation, training and workplace experience, employment placement assistance, in-placement (job retention) supports, and post-placements (career advancement) assistance;

- That even with such a continuum of services and assistance, for many individuals with multiple barriers to employment an intermediary step before actual placement into a standard job may be required, that is, a transitional work experience, which allows them to gain familiarity with the routine of a workplace while still receiving the necessary personal supports;
- The system needs to have strong outreach to employers, in the first instance to identify current and emerging job vacancies and needs, itemizing the skills required and, in the second instance, offering these employers recruitment and screening services for entry-level jobs and involving employers in shaping customized training programs for these positions;
- The system needs sufficient scale in order to offer:
    - An appropriate range of program and service options for each client;
    - A sufficient number of prospective job possibilities for those clients;
    - A sufficient pool of potential candidates to qualify for those jobs.

Existing programs in Toronto serving the harder-to-employ population may demonstrate limited and isolated successes but the current nature of funding arrangement (silo funding targeting specific populations and limited funding which largely encourages serving those easier to help succeed) means that the system as a whole fails those who most need assistance in accessing employment.

St. Christopher House, 'What Works When Work Doesn't?' Income Security Strategies For Working-Age Adults, Spring 2004.

The following options developed on the consultations in phase one of the project were presented and discussed in the multi-stakeholder groups.

a) Maintain current direction of government at all levels (increase in minimum wage and rate increase).

b) Raise OW and ODSP rates.

c) Increase eligibility and coverage of Employment Insurance.

d) Raise minimum wage/wage supplements.

e) Protect assets/allow growth of assets.

f) Make access to drug and dental benefits available to people who are poor.

g) Improve education and job training/recognize foreign credentials.

h) Destigmatize administration of welfare.

i) Increase affordable child and elder care.

j) Increase government co-ordination.

k) Increase supply of affordable housing.

l) Increase job creation.

St. Christopher House recommends adopting an overriding goal: remove disincentives to work and create incentives to work and do not punish those who cannot work. This is how it suggests MCSS get there:

a) Discuss and debate income security for working-age adults with more Canadians.

b) Rebalance the responsibilities for income security between governments, charities and private sector employers.

c) Rebalance the responsibilities for income security, health , immigration, child care, and other systems.

d) Maximize the benefits of the tax system and asset retention

e) Rebalance the responsibilities for income security between governments.

f) Recognize the value of ancillary supports for low-income working-age adults and recognize the costs of not providing these ancillary supports.

Dean Herd and Andrew Mitchell, 'Discouraged, Diverted and Disentitled: Ontario Works New Service Delivery Model'.

This report is titled "Discouraged, diverted and disentitled" for the simple reason that the new SDM, rather than being about improved service, in fact acts to inappropriately restrict entry and deny benefits to eligible people, in the service of the province's goals to reduce the caseload and save money. This systematic denial of benefits occurs throughout the application process, as social assistance applicants are discouraged, diverted and disentitled in the following ways:

- Excessive and inappropriate requests for information;
- Cumbersome and complicated application and appeals processes;
- Deliberately confusing procedures and language; and
- Greatly restricted appeal times.

In addition, the technology inadequately supports the employment assistance function forcing large municipalities to maintain their own secondary systems. Small municipalities may not have the capacity to do even that.

It appears that far from reducing administrative costs, and freeing up system resources to support people in their attempts to find employment, costs have, if anything, increased to fulfill the surveillance objectives of the new system. These costs come form the two-stage application processes, additional burdensome information requirements that are not related to proving eligibility, double data entry requirements, and the necessity for the delivery agents to maintain their own secondary systems, in-house, to manage key delivery functions such as employment assistan..

The new system is more concerned with surveillance and deterrence, than it is with assisting people to find employment.

Screening and Assessment in TANF/Welfare-to-Work, Ten Important Questions TANF Agencies and Their Partners Should Consider, 2001.

American TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) agency officials and subject matter experts generally agree that the most appropriate role for TANF agency staff is to screen clients for barriers to employment and facilitate referrals to organizations with expertise in diagnosing and addressing barriers. This belief is based in the fact that many TANF caseworkers are former eligibility and income maintenance workers with little experience with case management and barrier identification. To the extent that this is the case, states may need to consider training existing staff on barriers, screening, or assessment, hiring new staff to conduct screening/assessment, or creating partnerships with other agencies to assist with screening or assessment efforts.

TANF agencies generally have many partners in the service delivery process. However, for the purpose of identifying and addressing unobserved barriers to employment, TANF agencies may need to develop new relationships or change the nature of existing partnerships. These partnerships for the purpose of identifying and addressing barriers to employment faced by TANF clients bring with them many challenges, including understanding respective program philosophies and requirements.

Janet Mosher, Patricia Evans, Margaret Little, Eileen Morrow, Jo-Anne Boulding and Nancy VanderPlaats, Walking on Eggshells: Abused Women's Experiences of Ontario's Welfare System

Walking on Eggshells argues that women who flee from domestic violence and turn to welfare for refuge and support are inadequately supported and frequently have very negative experiences. Women who flee abuse often struggle to feed children and face a complicated, demeaning and suspicious system. Ontario Works and workfare are ineffective in helping them find work and many decide that returning to an abusive relationship is their "best" option.

The welfare system is also misused by abusive men to increase their power and control over the women they abused. Because women are often unable to support themselves on welfare, they do not leave their abusers or return to them. Abusers are also able to use the Welfare Fraud Hotline to accuse the women they assaulted of defrauding the system. Abused women are also often told to pursue their abusers for support as a precondition to welfare eligibility.

The report's key recommendations:

- Raise rates to meet true costs.
- End the claw back of the National Child Benefit
- Provided meaningful training and supports for employment, including assistance for education.
- Redesign support obligation policies that fail to protect women.
- Revamp fraud policies and practices.
- Provide accurate, complete information about the welfare system.
- Change the definition of 'spouse' and 'same-sex partner' to mirror family law.
- Change welfare worker attitudes towards recipients through measures such as training.

Colleen Purdon, Woman Abuse and Ontario Works in a Rural Community: Rural Women Speak about their Experiences with Ontario Works

Women Abuse and Ontario Works in a Rural Community asked women in Huron County to share their experiences with OW since 1995 and to provide recommendations for change.

The report's recommendations included:

- Make changes to the way OW responds to victims of domestic violence, including having a branch, or specially trained caseworkers to deal with women and children leaving abuse.
- Support the safety of abused women and their children by not forcing them to find employment right away and by having an outside agency, not the mother, find the father for child support.
- Increase benefits and supports for abused women on OW. Raising children needs to be valued by society. Baby bonuses and child support should not be deducted from monthly payments.
- Help abused women leave welfare by allowing them to save for education and self-sufficiency.
- Recognize the unique situation of abused women in rural areas. Women should not have to sell off assets, such as cars. A vehicle is a necessity in areas where public transit is limited or non-existent. Leaving an abusive situation should not lead to financial penalties for the victim.

Improving Employment Outcomes in Social Assistance: Discussions with Key Stakeholders

Purpose

- The purpose of these discussions is to gain a good understanding of how Ontario Works functions and to hear feedback on ways to improve employment outcomes for people on social assistance.

Objectives

- The key objective of these discussions is to learn from the expertise and experiences of individuals and organizations with a direct stake in employment outcomes for social assistance recipients.
- Direct stakeholder engagement will provide an opportunity to receive advice from social assistance recipients and others on the best ways to promote workforce entry and attachment.

Issues for Discussion

- The key areas for discussion are:

1. Employment and job supports, including those currently available through Ontario Works, as well as new opportunities and examples of productive labour market partnerships at the community level;
2. The identification of disincentives to employment, systemic challenges faced by social assistance recipients, and new ideas to promote labour force participation;
3. Innovations and best practices - examples of what is working well in communities, such as successful labour market partnerships; and
4. Evaluation – how should we evaluate the success of employment supports and initiatives that encourage workforce participation?

Consultation Plan

- The discussions will be conducted during April and May 2004.
- Discussions will be held in eight to twelve communities across Ontario.
- Discussions will include a broad cross section of sources, reflecting diverse regional circumstances, urban and rural experiences, a variety of caseload and labour market situations, as well as innovations and best practices.
- Small group meetings are intended to promote open and candid discussion.
- Through a range of meeting formats, invited consultation participants will include:
  - social assistance recipients;
  - Ontario Works offices;
  - community-based organizations working with social assistance recipients;
  - organizations providing training and employment services, including agencies specialising in services for youth, immigrants, single parents and others facing unique employment challenges;
  - local community and economic development bodies;
  - employers and employer organizations; and others, identified in consultation with local MPPs, municipal governments and other key community stakeholders.

Discussion Questions

(These were distributed before meetings and used to focus discussions and submissions.)

It is important to understand how policies impact real people. Because you have experience on the front lines, you are in an excellent position to report on what really happens. It would be very much appreciated if you would share your experiences, with the goal of improving the ability of people to make the transition from social assistance to employment.

1. If you could change 3 things about the way Ontario Works tries to help recipients move from social assistance to sustained employment what would they be?
2. Which disincentives and barriers to employment under the current system hinder sustained employment opportunities for people on social assistance i.e. loss of drug benefits, child care, transportation, etc.? If possible, please give real examples. What do you see as the solution? How does this solution help in your specific example?
3. In your experience, how well do current employment and job supports (i.e. community placements, literacy training, employment placements, LEAP, etc.) work to help someone move from social assistance to sustained, paid employment?
4. Are there productive labour market partnership in your community? What can we learn from them? Where and how can we pursue additional labour market partnerships?
5. How would you evaluate the success of employment supports and initiatives that encourage workforce participation?
6. How would you improve employment supports for groups with unique circumstances i.e. Sole Support Parents, recent immigrants, etc.?

What else do you think we should take into consideration as we review Ontario Works employment supports?